



Unpicking the Question

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Whether you're writing an essay, answering an exam question or preparing an assessed presentation, the first thing you'll need to do is to understand what you're being asked to do.

- Your work will be marked on how well you've answered the question, not simply on how much information you provide about the topic. This means it's vital that you ensure you've fully understood what you're required to do.
- Carefully read and analyse the assignment question and focus on key words. There are two types of key words to look for:
 - Words that tell you **WHAT** the topic is.
 - Words that tell you **HOW** to write the essay. This includes the type of essay (argue, discuss, describe etc.) and how many parts there are to the essay (First...then...finally...).



Content Words

- Look at the example below. Notice how the **content words** outline the topic.

What is the topic?

content words

Discuss the **effects of long term poverty on health outcomes in Australia** and suggest strategies to address these issues.



Instructional Words

- Notice how the **instructional words** explain how to write the assignment.

How do I do this task?

Discuss the effects of long term poverty on health outcomes in Australia and **suggest strategies** to address these issues.

instructional words

- What does this mean in relation to your essay? How would you plan/structure it?



Assignment Structure

- You need to write the essay in two parts.

How do I do this task?

Discuss the effects of long term poverty on health outcomes in Australia and **suggest strategies** to address these issues.

instructional words

- **Part 1** – Present an argument by discussing the effects of long term poverty.
- **Part 2** – Suggest possible solutions.



Analysing the Task

- Another example could be an exam question:
 - “**Contrast the impact of social media versus newspaper reporting on at least two recent outbreaks of civil unrest.**”
- What is the question **about**?
 - “Contrast the impact of **social media** versus **newspaper reporting** on at least two recent outbreaks of **civil unrest.**”
 - This may sound obvious, but it can be easy to miss elements of the task, especially in longer questions.
 - You will **lose marks** if you don't refer to everything that you're being asked about, so this is an important step.



Analysing the Task

- What are you being asked to **use**?
 - “Contrast the impact of social media versus newspaper reporting on **at least two recent outbreaks** of civil unrest.”
 - Here you should identify all of the sources, theories, materials and examples that you are being asked to refer to.
 - Sometimes the materials you need to use will be explicitly stated in the question; other times you'll be able to choose your own sources.
 - In this case, you'd need to choose two (or more) examples of recent outbreaks of civil unrest.



Analysing the Task

- What do you need to **do** to answer the question?
 - “**Contrast** the impact of social media versus newspaper reporting on at least two recent outbreaks of civil unrest.”
 - It's not enough to simply write down everything you know about the topics and sources you've identified. Remember that you're being assessed on how well you answer the question, **not** how much you know about the topic.
 - Your task will include an **instruction word** which tells you what to do with the information. The instruction word is the verb in your question or task; make sure you follow this instruction throughout your essay.



Instruction Words

Instruction Verb	Meaning
Analyse	Break the information into constituent parts; examine the relationship between the parts; question the information.
Compare	Look for similarities and differences between; perhaps conclude which is preferable; implies evaluation.
Contrast	Bring out the differences.
Describe	Give a detailed, full account of the topic.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument; debate; give reason for and against; examine the implications of the topic.
Evaluate	Appraise the worth of something in the light of its truth or usefulness; assess the merits and explain.
Examine	Look at carefully; consider.
Explain	Make plain and clear; give reasons for.
Summarise	Give a concise account of the chief points of a matter, removing unnecessary detail.



Table Matrix

- Here's an example of a table which includes the topics in what the question is **about**, the example subjects of what the question needs you to **use**, and the instruction word for what you need to **do**, giving you a visual representation to help you unpick the question:

Contrast	Social Media	Newspaper Reporting	Civil Unrest
Arab Spring	Communication, way around censorship, planning for events, real time, Twitter and YouTube	Able to report both sides of the story, access to more information, much slower	Democratic demonstrations against current leaders, problematic, sometimes violent
2011 UK Riots	Aid in avoiding police and planning, used to prosecute after the fact, BBM, YouTube, authorities also tweeting	Analysis after the fact. Able to report on both sides of story. Continued coverage after event (after had disappeared from social media).	Triggered by police shooting of a young man who possibly had a weapon. Focused on property damage and looting. Roving groups went into city centres to protest and loot



Summary – Understanding Your Task

- We've now looked at two different ways of picking the question, both essentially the same concept:
 - What are the topic **'content words'** and how to see to the task **'instructional words'**and
 - What are you being asked **about**, what are you being asked to **use** and what are you being asked to **do**.
- The best way to get quicker at the process it to **practice!** Look through past reports, essays or exam papers for example questions to practise on.

